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ABSTRACT

Acute intercultural communication problems posed by multilingualism in Papua New Guinea are discussed, and ways in which they are being addressed are examined. An introductory section outlines the language situation in Melanesia. It is noted that the area's language diversity and colonization and missionary activity have resulted in the emergence of several, mostly European, languages of wider communication. Government policy concerning official languages in Papua New Guinea, which has over 850 native languages, is described and the evolution of literacy and language policy in education in the last two decades is chronicled. Intergroup misunderstanding, suspicion, and hostility arising in part from language diversity are seen as endemic, causing problems particularly in resource development projects. Finally, a program at the Papua New Guinea University of Technology, opened in 1995 and designed to deal specifically with problems of communication in economic and social development is described. The program offers qualifications at certificate, diploma, or degree levels in a wide range of subject areas, including conflict resolution, law and administration, technology, sociology, environmental studies, critical thinking, mathematics, media studies, translation and interpretation, economics, technical and proposal writing, engineering, and map reading. Contains 34 references. (MSE)

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Language Choice in an Acutely Multilingual Society: Communication and Development in Papua New Guinea

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Abstract

This paper looks at how acute communication problems posed by extreme multilingualism are dealt with in the Melanesian state of Papua New Guinea. First the background situation is analysed, showing how language diversity has led to the emergence of various languages of wider communication over the last century. Then government policy in education and administration is briefly reviewed. Finally, a promising tertiary programme in Communication for Development at the Papua New Guinea University of Technology is described.

The Melanesian Language Scene.

Melanesia is an area in the south-west Pacific characterized by extreme linguistic diversity. Since the definition of Melanesia is based on fundamentally racial criteria, its boundaries are somewhat arbitrary, but it includes the independent states of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, and the territories of Irian Jaya (Indonesia) and New Caledonia (France). Although Fijians are "Melanesian" in appearance, Fiji is culturally more similar to the Polynesian societies to the east. Torres Strait Islanders appear to be Melanesian physically, linguistically and culturally, but may not share that perception themselves. Further west in south-east Asia, what might be called a Melanesia component can be found in the ethnically diverse population.

The number of languages spoken in this region is remarkable (see Table 1). Although the area contains only about one tenth of one percent of the world's population, nearly one quarter of the world's languages are spoken here. Exact numbers are difficult to establish, as research is still continuing into many of the languages. The reason for such diversity is not exactly known. Although it may popularly be thought that the rugged terrain is responsible for isolating small cultural groups, this cannot be the whole explanation, as the largest indigenous language community in Papua New Guinea, Enga, with approximately 160,000 speakers, occupies some of the most rugged terrain on earth. Geographical isolation may, however, be a contributing factor, together with other factors such as a pride in and emphasis of cultural and linguistic differences and word taboos which may have led to the speciation of a large number of languages over the 30,000 or so years that man has been in Melanesia (Foley 1986). In addition to the factors mentioned above, some conditions favouring the formation of large linguistic units, such as centralised political control and writing systems are not present in Melanesia (Laycock 1982a).

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Languages of Wider Communication

Such linguistic diversity is naturally a severe barrier to communication over areas larger than clan or village domains. Typically, Melanesians have possessed a high degree of multilingualism, and this appears to have been the traditional solution to the problem of communication across ethnic boundaries. In addition, languages of wider communication have come into use in the last hundred years or so. Firstly, colonial

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powers established administrations based on the language of the metropolitan power. The western half of the island of New Guinea was colonized by the Dutch in 1828, while Britain and Germany occupied the remainder of the island and the Bismarck Archipelago in 1884. The whole of the eastern part of New Guinea and adjacent islands came under Australian administration in the second decade of the 20th century, while Dutch New Guinea became the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya in 1963. The New Hebrides became a unique Anglo-French condominium, while the French colonised New Caledonia. Thus English, French, German and Dutch and more recently Bahasa Indonesia came to be spoken in the region.

Table 1 - Melanesian Languages and Populations (Approximate)

Country/Territory	Population	Languages	Av. size
Papua New Guinea	3.8 million	~850	~4500
Solomon Islands	300,000	86	~3500
Vanuatu	150,000	105	~1500
Irian Jaya	1.5 million	250+	~6000
New Caledonia	150,000	27	~5500

Secondly, missionary activity involved a certain amount of language spread as mission lingua francas were adopted, such as Motu, Kiwai, Kuanua, Kote and Yabem in Papua New Guinea. Thirdly a lasting impact was to be felt by the emergence of indigenous pidgin languages in the central Pacific in the nineteenth century. The exact process by which an English-based pidgin emerged from the nautical trading activity of the period is still the subject of considerable debate (see, for example, Mühlhäusler 1978, Keesing 1988), but a widespread English-based pidgin became established which now has its descendants in the regional varieties of Melanesian Pidgin: Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea, Pijin in Solomon Islands and Bislama in Vanuatu.

Language Policy in Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea, with over 850 indigenous languages according to the latest estimates by the Summer Institute of Linguistics, is an interesting case study of how a recently independent country (1975) deals with extreme linguistic diversity. According to the constitution, there are three national languages, English, Tok Pisin and Hiri Motu, although none is designated as the official language. English is the language of most formal education, and is widely respected as both a key to employment opportunities and a means of communicating with the outside world. Hiri Motu is a pidginized form of Motu, an Austronesian language spoken in a dozen coastal villages near the capital Port Moresby. Hiri Motu was used by the Australian administration, especially the police, as a lingua franca in Papua, and, although the number of speakers was considerably less than Tok Pisin, it was retained as a national language after independence largely for political reasons. At the time of independence, there was considerable suspicion of "New Guineans" by coastal Papuans, and the secession movement *Papua Besena* had widespread support. Today, the idea of independence for Papua has virtually disappeared, and Tok Pisin appears to be gaining ground in the southern provinces.

Tok Pisin actually arose outside Papua New Guinea on the plantations of the Pacific, but the need for a lingua franca as the country opened up to the outside world ensured that there was a role for pidgin when returning labourers settled back into New Guinea towards the end of the nineteenth century, and it has remained a crucial resource in the multilingual society ever since (Laycock 1982b). The Duke of York Islands off New Britain became a local centre for returning labourers and hence a focus for the spread of the language. A small but significant proportion of the vocabulary of Tok Pisin is derived from the languages of New Britain and south-west New Ireland (Goulden 1990, Ross 1992), and there is also some evidence for the influence of these languages on its syntax (Mosel 1980). Although widely derided by expatriates as imbecilic and comical, (Mühlhäusler 1979:121) Tok Pisin continued to stabilise and develop in the twentieth century (Mühlhäusler 1975). Most of the business of the national parliament since independence has been conducted in Tok Pisin, and it continues to gain ground in both official and informal contexts. Today, it is by far the most widely spoken language in the country, and there are considerable numbers of young people who speak it as a first language, i.e. as a creole (Smith 1990).

Language and Education

In spite of the dramatic growth of the role of Tok Pisin in recent years, the position of English in government-sponsored education has remained firmly entrenched (Johnson 1977). Many arguments have been given for retaining English - its status as a world language, its role as a language of intra-national and international communication, the availability of teaching materials and so on. Mission education has been more flexible, and many "tok ples" (i.e. vernacular) primary schools were set up in various parts of the country. However, these were often perceived by communities as offering poorer economic opportunities than English-based schooling. The significance of language choice, of course, has implications for social and political relationships as well as education (Sankoff 1976, Cheshire 1991; see also Pennycook 1994 on the political implications of the use of English). The first voices raised in favour of a greater role for Tok Pisin in education were ironically from expatriate academics (for example Litteral 1975, Dutton 1976, Mühlhäusler, Wurm and Dutton 1979, Kale 1990, Lynch 1990), while many English-educated national administrators continued to favour English. Recently, however, national academics have added their support (Nekitel 1984).

Not surprisingly, the educational and cultural costs of teaching initial literacy in a foreign language have come to be felt more and more. In the 1980's, many provincial governments began to establish vernacular pre-school literacy programmes, usually for two or three years before the beginning of primary education at the age of eight. The ideology was primarily cultural rather than educational: children were seen to be losing their cultural traditions in a foreign education system. The success of many of these programmes and the enthusiasm they generated soon made the educational benefits apparent also. In a major policy initiative, elder statesman Sir Paulius Matane issued the *Matane Report on the Philosophy of Education*, (1987), which restored a greater role for cultural identity in education, including vernacular literacy programmes. This theme was taken up to a certain extent in the Papua New Guinea government's Education Sector Review (1991), stressing the need for initial literacy in a language the child understands. However, this was to be confined to a pre-primary elementary period, in which time it was hoped that the child would make the transition to English-

medium education in grade 1, an assumption which Oladejo (1992:8) points out is "over-ambitious and unrealistic". The expansion of vernacular literacy does, however, continue, with recent emphasis on training local literacy workers recruited from within the communities they serve (Faraclas 1989). A number of Tok Pisin-medium schools are in operation, especially in the East Sepik Province, and institutions run by the Lutheran Church, and these appear to be showing promise with regard to early literacy (Siegel 1992, 1993). In the government primary schools, the English-only policy is still officially in operation, although in practice, it appears that more and more Tok Pisin is being used in the earlier grades. Calls have also been made for an expanded role for pidgins in tertiary education (Bickerton 1975, Swan and Lewis, 1990).

Language, Communication and National Development

Papua New Guinea has had enormous problems to cope with in the early years of independence. Inter-group misunderstanding, suspicion and hostility are still features of everyday life, although the existence of Tok Pisin as a lingua franca has helped here somewhat. The extremely rapid pace of social change, Urbanization, breakdown of law and order and unrealistic expectations arising from the education system have led to disillusion and frustration. A number of problems can specifically be attributed to language and communication difficulties. As primary education is conducted through the medium of English, the system encourages a high tolerance of incomprehension and the development of survival strategies rather than more fundamental understanding, and what Ahai (1989) terms "mystification of knowledge". As a result, proficiency in English at the end of six years of primary education, when many are forced to leave due to lack of secondary school places, may be inadequate. The education of a generation of semi-English-speaking youth who drop out of school to find limited employment opportunities has created an acute generation gap and attendant social problems such as the emergence of "rascal" (criminal) gangs. In the area of development, there is widespread mis-interpretation of government policy information, even if translated into Tok Pisin (Franklin 1990). This may be manifested in suspicion of, or unrealistic expectations about development projects, often leading to excessive compensation demands.

Such tensions are frequently met with in resource development projects. Since much of Papua New Guinea's land is under customary ownership, this creates problems between developers and landowners and often a conflict develops between the competing demands of land tenure and development needs. Land is extremely important to many Melanesians, and the complexities of indigenous land tenure systems may be inadequately understood by foreign companies controlling resource projects. An extreme example is the Bougainville debacle, where a large multinational copper and gold mining company, Bougainville Copper, has been forced to suspend operations due to militant landowner actions. Government intervention has resulted in a long and bloody struggle between the Papua New Guinea Defence Force and secessionist rebels.

This background led to the development of a tertiary programme at the Papua New Guinea University of Technology specifically to deal with problems of communication in development. Its aim is to educate graduates who can effectively operate as liaison personnel in communications between landowners and government or private resource development projects. The programme, for one, two or four years, offers qualifications at certificate, diploma or degree levels, and includes courses in a wide-

ranging array of background subjects (see Table 2). The first intake was at the beginning of 1995.

Table 2 - Course Content, Communication for Development

1st Year	Courses in language and communication; negotiating skills, Melanesian societies and politics, business, law, land administration, forestry, information technology, rural sociology, management, environmental studies, valuation; fieldwork.
2nd Year	Courses in language in society, conflict resolution, land administration, commercial law, critical thinking, mathematics, media studies, translation and interpretation, forest economics, land tenure; fieldwork.
3rd Year	Courses in communication with landowners, employees and management, technology and society, development studies, organizational behaviour, forest economics, engineer in society, mining economics, social change, industrial relations, wildlife management, statistics; fieldwork.
4th Year	Courses in preparation of proposals, reports and seminars, administrative law, map reading, environmental engineering; case studies in resource development, industrial experience (1 semester).

As can be seen from the course outline, the programme offers a wide range of subjects related to the major resources of Papua New Guinea, to language and communication matters, and related areas such as management and media studies. The language component reflects the philosophy of the current head of the Department of Language and Communication Studies that code switching, multilingualism and language mixture constitute a super-ordinate code which is better considered as a resource rather than a deficiency (Moody 1992). It remains to be seen whether the number of topics is too large to have a sufficiently in-depth background in any of them, or whether this broad-based approach is what is required for successful liaison work. However, pending a full evaluation of the programme, it seems to be a promising approach to solving some of the communication problems frustrating development in the country.

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